Interview with MAP Office – Hong Kong

by Josef Ng

MAP Office is a multidisciplinary platform devised by Laurent Gutierrez (b. 1966, Casablanca, Morocco) and Valérie Portefaix (b. 1969, Saint-Étienne, France). This duo of artists/architects has been based in Hong Kong since 1996, working on physical and imaginary territories using varied means of expression including drawing, photography, video, installations, performance, and literary and theoretical texts. Their entire project forms a critique of spatio-temporal anomalies and documents how human beings subvert and appropriate space. Humor, games, and fiction are also part of their approach, in the form of small publications providing a further format for disseminating their work.

Selected works, discussed in the interview below:

Crab Island **(2010)** is an installation consisting of 24 glass aquarium tanks housing a total of 88 crabs in four towers illuminated by

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fluorescent tube lighting, mimicking standardized residential towers

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and inverting the logic of luxury in population distribution by concentrating the crabs at the greatest density towards the upper levels. A mirrored surface at the central column of the structure presents the reflections of viewers sharing a vertical plane with the crabs, which in turn react to the reflected movements of viewers in the exhibition space, casting shadows through the water that appear on the gallery walls. The motion of the contained animals becomes the focal point of the installation.

In the video ***Moving Sideways*** **(2010)** the moving image follows crabs similar to those housed in the Crab Island as they run frenetically back and forth across the tidal wash of a sandy beach at nighttime. This seems to be a diagrammatic study in flocking behaviors, a model of sorts for collective motion across unpredictable lines of transit. Like human bodies moving through the space of the city, these crabs moving in seemingly strange patterns across their home environment of the beach constantly discover new forms of motor possibilities and, therein, emotive forms; embodying all of the potential of their environment, the motion of the crabs becomes a property of resistance and of production.

Runscape **(2010)**, originally a part of *Moving Sideways,* is a film that depicts several young male figures sprinting through public spaces of Hong Kong, invariably via the visual mode of the long shot, while a narrator describes this action through the rhetoric of poststructuralist urban theory. This narration makes repeated reference to a range of texts from the psychogeographical dérive of urbanism in Guy Debord and the Situationists to the biopolitical machines of Gilles Deleuze and the literary styles of Jean-Luc Nancy.

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The runners both follow existing paths and establish new ones, moving
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in straight lines through crowds and across rooftops while also using exterior walls as springboards for less-likely forms of motion.



Josef Ng: Let’s start this conversation with the stationary process, the static part of your work. Of course I am also inte rested in the movement around and between different projects, but works like *Moving Sideways* present a certain resistance to the idea of movement. Analogously in *Motion Sickness*, the idea of sickness becomes a constraint, a symptom of resistance. There is also danger, a boundary to pass to get inside the exhibition. *Runscape*, on the other hand, relishes that boundary and invites everyone to join in the race. But to start by *Moving Sideways*, I am curious to know where, when you were planning this project, you actually wanted to navigate?

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MAP: At that time we initiated the exhibition with the clear intention of being deviant. There appeared two conditions with which we wanted to work: the shift and the misfit. Moving Sideways addresses this question of fit and misfit within a given system, moving then to the ability to shift from one condition to another. This can be examined from the perspective of identity or the point of reference of discipline or rules—being part of or external to a system. *Moving Sideways* is about always moving toward unexpected areas. MAP Office is always expected to produce research on the next phenomena of Hong Kong or new territorial developments in China, but we are cautious not to fall into such labeling of what we are doing. For this reason we moved from academic research to narrative fiction as an alternative open method to communicate our research.

JN: Most of your early work is associated with specific cities or territories, but at one point you suddenly decided to detach yourselves from this solid ground and explore more abstract areas.

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MAP: Exactly. *Moving Sideways* is without context, besides that of the gallery.

JN: Yes, or it is, in this case, a psychological context.

MAP: In moving away from labels the artist gains a total freedom. It was not so long ago that we met, so when we decided to work together our previous installations did not give direction to the new one. We were able to start fresh without following any particular artistic conventions.

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JN: I never associated you with your functions as architects, artists, or architect-artists. I wanted to understand more about Hong Kong through your interventions. It started from inside out, from the gallery to the streets around Sheung Wan.

MAP: Yes, and the irony is that we can also characterize *Moving Sideways* as an exploration of a new territory filled with architectures. In this territory we make a very unstable ground, something we already tested in the Guangdong Museum. We call for the attention of visitors, forcing them to pay extreme attention to where and how they walk across the exhibition. Before reaching a triangular pedestal and drawings, they must pass through a field of thousands of steel ball bearings activated by the steps of anyone else present in the space. Continuing this, crabs running on the beach in the film *Moving Sideways* exacerbate the idea of a moving ground. Architecture happens in the form of Crab Island, a cruciform tower supporting 24 water tanks on six levels, each housing two to four crabs.

JN: Every context has a distinctive role. The artist performs differently in each context, and the context in turn influences the work. I would like to speak also about how MAP Office has made a move towards film as a new medium.

MAP: The exploration of the moving image is not entirely new

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for us: our first video project took place in 1999. It is true,

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however, that, with *Moving Sideways* and *Runscape* not long after, we have become more free with the use of the moving image. We have begun to acknowledge more value to this free narrative, recognizing also that it will engage another public. Moving from the restricted number of viewers for a given exhibition to the larger number at a screening, the impact of film is more important. In all seriousness, however, there is a shift in cinema at the moment that encourages experimentation with how movies are produced and consumed. Art is a natural direction for this laboratory style of experimentation, including not only video but also short and feature films. This is one of the directions we are taking, one we would like to pursue in the future.

JN: I interpret *Runscape*, which is developed from the three fragments visible in *Moving Sideways*, as a narrative documentary on how the subject—the runner—integrates urban space to become the city. Is that your intention?

MAP: In the development of the film there were two distinct moments. The video clips use the city as a performative space as the performer defines new routes within the built environment and engages the public to do the same and follow him. Then the second step, in the form of the short movie, is something different; here the image fades in importance compared to the voiceover. The viewer faces a political position that unfolds the history of protest space in which citizens can express themselves, claiming the occupation of the street by the public in opposition to the current tendency toward the privatization of public spaces. The viewer appropriates and reengages with the city. Throughout the narrative there appears the historical development of riots and protests and the logic of fights; the most important phrase of the video occurs when the narrator says: *“My body is my weapon, a bullet that needs no gun.”* Running is powerful, and everyone is entitled to do it.

JN: Running from where? Running to where?

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MAP: Running to run, running as an action. The beginning and end of the course do not matter: running is what matters. It is a selfish contribution to the society. It is about the "I" in the city, the action and participation of the individual in society— referring to Henri Lefebvre's construction of social space. *Runscape* as a video could not have happened without the identification of running as a basic motion in the three original video clips. That may sound exceedingly simple or obvious, but it took us a while to identify this action as a political tool, in many ways equivalent to demonstrating as form of claim.

JN: I can see that there is no end to the action. It is more about the journey.

MAP: Besides this, however, the journey is also for us a question of media. In *Runscape* the narrator (Norman Ford) suggests a strong relationship between the action of running and cinema: "moving body, moving image… running is a personal cinema at the speed of 24 images per second… stop shooting, start running." The consciousness of speed accelerates the space surrounding the runner. It allows him to be more alert of the space around him. Unfortunately today we observe social disengagement when it the opposite is most needed, especially with the context of globalization of society—though this situation might change.

JN: I see running as a form of escape as well as a repetitive mode that risks becoming insulated from society.

MAP: Running to escape, running to create a new-scape; but you cannot run away without running forward. The simple beauty of running is that we are talking about an action opposed to passivity. Because we have two legs, we have the possibility to run.

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JN: It brings forward the idea of a journey. I also feel that I am
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running from my own roots. I would like to speak now about the two living creatures that you have used in recent projects: the parrot and the crab. Parroting implies actions of following and copying, while the crab moves in a fundamentally different way. There is an interesting and almost contradictory aspect to these two animals.

MAP: You may recall that the first proposal for *Moving Sideways* involved the use of sea urchins and crabs. Both crabs and parrots are disturbing animals. The parrot references Rabindranath Tagore, with his novel against colonialism. This beautifully colored animal remains strong behind its elegance; the crab, similarly, is perceived as a warrior, a confrontational animal.



JN: The use of animals in the work offers a tableau within a tableau, a work within the work. *The Crab Island* tower creates different tableaux on a constant basis. It is very much about Hong Kong.

MAP: There is a movement with the *Crab Island* that visitors often tend to disregard: the mirrored surface of the core reflects the image of the viewer between the crabs moving in the aquariums. Because of the geometry of the structure, it takes just one step to the side to remove your reflection from the scene but remain present as an observer. What is essential here is not so much the crab as the position of the viewer misled by the crab—a narcissistic experience. How much are we willing to be part of a system, and how much can we change this position?

JN: That you call this sculpture an island is interesting, as an island is usually perceived not as a vertical structure but rather as a horizontal one. The paradox appears again in *Desert Islands*. Why refer to the 101 islands as a desert?

MAP: This references the identically titled text of Gilles

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Deleuze, in which he develops the notion of the “re-” as a postmodern discourse. An island is never about production or origin but rather about the possibility of reproduction or a second origin. The dynamic élan is needed to achieve the potentiality of the second time. We also use the classifications of islands delimited by geographers and reused by the philosophers in terms of continental and oceanic islands. The video animation *Island is Land* plays with both the logic of repetition and the classification of islands, echoing Deleuze in both respects. We like the fact that the Deleuzian “re-” is similar to the case of the parrots. We are always repeating or parroting each other. Two, in our case, is always better than one—looping. The other video in the show was *Island Resort*, a montage of cinematic moments always repeating the same scene of the discovery of the island: the castaway landing accidentally on the island, the first step on the promised land, the exoticism of the island, the voodoo ceremony, and so on. The sailor who first spots an island after a tragic journey will shout “land,” not “island,” because it is opposed to water. An island is somehow an anomaly in the logic of the land. It still needs the water to exist. *Desert Island*s also included 100 mirrors, each representing one island location in text and drawing. Each real island is selected because of the human impact that may have shaped it; the drawing beside the geographical reference of the text shows traces of an explosion, as if those islands have created a new geography of fireworks. This is our impression after analyzing the contemporary logic of islands, again gaining importance in the geopolitical redefinition of the world within processes of globalization.

JN: Does an island operate like a parasite?

MAP: The island is all potential. Islands are laboratories for humanity. Islands are our new laboratories after Hong Kong and China—now a fragmented territory.

JN: I come from an island. Singapore is an island. What you are saying scares me: if you make the analogy between island and laboratory, I am a lab rat.

MAP: Do you doubt this? Are you frightened to face it?

JN: No. I somehow escape the experiment because I do not want to be part of the experience.

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MAP: Singapore is one of our 100, one of the most fascinating for having been so manipulated and yet remaining so boring.

JN: Singapore has been so engineered that it is perhaps one of the most successful. What was your first idea when you did the island exhibition in Bangkok ?

MAP: We immediately thought about Rirkrit Tiravanija , as we were exhibiting in his gallery (*Grid vs. Chaos*, with Amy Cheung and Wei Leng Tay, Gallery VER 2010) as well as asking ourselves how he would approach the project. That was the main inspiration for the title of the piece, *Simply Enjoy the Scenery*, which is a direct reference to Rirkrit's *Ne Travaillez Jamais*. For a series of works, he appropriated Guy Debord's slogan, three words that contained an entire program. A simple statement: sharp and clean, representing a certain spirit. This statement *Simply Enjoy the Scenery* comes from the words on a Thai tourist brochure. We wanted to establish a dialogue between the French and the Thai theories of society and culture.

JN: I can see how the title and the work could be paradigmatic for Thailand: the paradise island is a global phenomenon.

MAP: The island we use in the project is Koh Tapu, the tiny rock seen in the James Bond movie *The Man with a Golden Gun*, in which it is used as a base from which to blow up the world. Our title uses a statement made by a tourist agency in reference to the size and geography of this specific island, referring to the level of deception in the reactions of tourists. Tourists expect not the actual island but rather an image mediated by cinema. By extension, we are often disappointed when visiting a gallery, expecting more from the artists and the show.

JN: Hong Kong Island offers a certain transitory nature. Singapore is also an island but of a different kind, offering more of this laboratory perspective.

MAP: Thailand for us refers to the very early development of mass tourism for sex, resorts, and fake goods that every European experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. *Simply Enjoy the Scenery* is about this mass consumption.

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JN: Thailand is a land where islands are enjoyed. *Simply Enjoy the Scenery* is very Thai both in its simplicity and in its generosity. It is a welcoming feeling.

MAP: If you do not simply enjoy, you simply do not enjoy. It is the opposite of Western and particularly American advertisements promoting “the world’s biggest,” “the largest,” and so on, with the constant use of superlatives to promote anything and everything. For the Thai, “simply” is associated with a basic feeling. It is just the perfect dose of what needs to be done. The rest is part of personal experience, and you will not be disappointed.

JN: That was a group show with the curatorial direction of *Grid Versus Chaos*, I suppose a comparison between the urban structures and lifestyles of Hong Kong and Bangkok.



MAP: Our answer came in two parts. The 101 islands identified in Hong Kong and discussed as *Desert Islands* here takes another format: previously represented in a series of funeral mirror plates, they are now transformed into 100 three-dimensional miniature domestic devices spread across a grid on the gallery floor. All 100 islands are transformed into furniture models with various heights and degrees of vegetation, following some of the original geographical logics of the islands represented. Each received a small plant that we brought in a local flower market. The second element is the “one” of the 101, always an exception for the local context. This island is Koh Tapu, built using a different technique and at a different scale; this is the island titled *Simply Enjoy the Scenery*.

JOSEF NG is a curator based in Beijing and Bangkok

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This interview took place in Hong Kong, in the spring of 2010. For more information please visit the artists' home page:

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